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## **'I should never tell anybody that my mother was shot'**

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*Published in:*  
Oral History

Published: 01.01.2019

*Document Version*  
Early version, also known as pre-print

*Citation for pulished version (APA):*  
Allemann, L. (2019). 'I should never tell anybody that my mother was shot': understanding personal testimony and family memories within Soviet Lapland. *Oral History*, 47(2), 65-73.

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**Lukas Allemann**

**'I should never tell anybody that my mother was shot': understanding personal testimony and family memories within Soviet Lapland**

**Abstract**

This article examines the biography of a descendant of Norwegian settler and indigenous Sámi dual heritage on the Kola Peninsula in North-Western Russia whose parents had become victims of Stalin's terror. Analysing personal experience with oral history methods reveals that the protagonists were trying to actively shape their own and their fellows' fate. This challenges the common script of passive victims of a totalitarian state. The narrator's emphasis on agency as well as her humanising of the state representatives are discussed as meaning-making and strategies for coping with traumatic childhood events.

**Keywords:** *Lapland*, Sámi, Norwegian, Stalinism, Kola Peninsula, grassroots agency

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This article explores one life history interview of a Soviet/Russian citizen with Norwegian and Sámi roots, Gidrun' Aleksandrovna Mironova, who spent all her life in Russian Lapland. The historical timescale of the interview ranges from the end of the nineteenth century to the present, concentrating especially on the years under Stalin (from 1937 until the end of the 1940s). Analysis suggests that individual biographies can reveal new insights into hitherto understudied aspects of Stalinism about how individuals dealt and lived with the system, the common thread being that victims of former Stalinist repressive policy, and those around them, could show forms agency that undermine often tacitly implied assumptions about their passivity. Derrida's suggestion that individuals in history play roles that are 'simultaneously active and passive'<sup>1</sup> is also valid, I suggest, in societies with a totalitarian leadership.

Approaching Stalinism through the use of oral history, I endorse Kuromiya's recommendation about being more 'attentive to the unwritten aspects of the Great Terror'.<sup>2</sup> There is already a considerable body of oral history literature on dislocation and persecution among Baltic, Karelian, and some Northern indigenous minorities in the Soviet Union, dealing with agency and coping strategies of the people.<sup>3</sup> However, the Stalinist repressions among minorities on the Kola Peninsula have been explored so far relying mostly on conventional written sources. Kotljarchuk's recent work on Sámi and Nordic minorities (Finns and Norwegian on the Kola Peninsula, Swedes in Ukraine) made some significant contributions.<sup>4</sup> His research delivers a detailed analysis of the state's perspective, the motivations of its leaders, the propaganda machinery and numbers of people imprisoned and killed, based on qualitative and quantitative analysis of archival materials. This focus on political systems offers, in James Scott's words, a top-down approach of 'seeing like

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a state'<sup>5</sup> but aspects of grassroots agency remain largely unconsidered. This results, for instance, in Kotljarchuk's general impression that 'the ethnic cleansing of Finnish and Swedish rural communities proceeded without any protests on the part of the victims and their families',<sup>6</sup> while my findings show typical instances of subversive 'small' agency that did not necessarily make their way into the archives. Thus, archive-based historiography tends to replicate the official script of the Great Terror or any other state-directed social engineering campaign as a well-organised, consistent process, in which people were merely the 'raw material'.<sup>7</sup> Oral history, in contrast, is able to open spaces that diverge from these tropes of passive victims and active oppressors. Personal experience and memory open ways to critique and allow for greater human agency, including subtle 'slippage' from the dominant narratives about the design and implementation of such campaigns.

Subjectivity is an integral part of any historical source, written or oral: it cannot and should not be eliminated, but recognised, valued and treated as a feature worthy of exploration. Oral history analysis is rooted in the narrative character of the sources used, as anthropologist Hastrup and oral historian Portelli have both convincingly shown.<sup>8</sup> Here I support my analysis with extensive narrative-descriptive quotations from the interview and acknowledge the process of oral history co-creation that links researcher and the interviewee. How we give meaning to and construct an individual biography, much of which happens through expression or re-telling of emotions, motivations and interests, highlights how interviewees should not be just an information resource we tap into and then theorise about our findings. As Bornat identifies, 'interviewees engage themselves in active theorising about their lives'.<sup>9</sup> In this sense, the oral historian's work is not theorising on raw data, but a meta-theorising

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on lives that have already been theorised (or given coherence via self-narration) and conceptualised in certain ways by the interviewee. Gidrun' puts herself and her ancestors into a bigger picture of being active members of society instead of passive victims, without denying the atrocities they experienced. In the following sections I analyse why Gidrun' put such emphases into her narrative.

This discussion is part of the wider dissemination of findings from the ORHELIA (Oral History of Empires by Elders in the Arctic) project undertaken between 2011 and 2015 by the Arctic anthropology research team at the Arctic Centre, University of Lapland, Finland.<sup>10</sup> Research was conducted in Russian Lapland,<sup>11</sup> and also in Finnish Lapland, as well as among the European and the Yamal Nenets, in the Khanty-Mansi region and in the Lena Delta region. Approximately 450 hours of biographical-narrative interviews were recorded, ninety hours of which on the Kola Peninsula. Within the relatively small but scattered indigenous communities, we found and reached interviewees mainly through the snowball principle (recommendations by others, acquaintances evolving during long-term fieldwork).

Such non-structured, non-directive, narrative and collaborative interviews require long conversations of several hours. I follow the method suggested by Rosenthal,<sup>12</sup> according to which in the first part of the interview I try not to interrupt the interviewee. This is the main narration. The interviewees are encouraged to develop the recollections and structure the narration according to criteria they find relevant themselves: a process of self-understanding takes place already at this stage. An attentive and encouraging listener is already a great and rarely available motivator for initiating the flow of memory and self-understanding. In this sense, narrative-biographical interviews can have a freeing and thus curative effect. The main narration

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is followed by a second part, in which I ask more specific questions. This second part consists, on the one hand, of questions deriving from a prepared list of topics, about which the interviewee did not talk in his main narration; and, on the other hand, of questions deriving from my notes, which I took during the main narration. Often a second or third encounter can prove useful, both for the researcher and for the informant.

I combine interviewing with participant observation during extensive fieldwork stays.<sup>13</sup> The participant observation such interviews were embedded in is an inalienable part of the research data. Through longer and recurring stays on the Kola Peninsula I built the needed rapport and immersion, and thus the needed a pre-conditions for posing meaningful questions, understanding answers, and being understood. This 'part-time socialisation'<sup>14</sup> allows to access life-worlds maintain this relationship. Participant observation helps to develop an awareness that some categories a scholar uses on a daily basis do not necessarily match with people's perceptions, memories and utterances: An unexpectedly high number of different narrative and interpretational patterns among interviewees can enter into conflict with the scholar's initial assumptions and categories about his/her interviewees and the research topic. Among German oral history theoreticians, this phenomenon has been called 'de-typification shock [Enttypisierungsschock]',<sup>15</sup> which during comparatively short interviewing visits can result in feelings of disorientedness and frustration. Through long-term fieldwork we can make sense and productive use of such initial experiences.

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## **Ethnic diversity on the Kola Peninsula**

Of all far-north regions of Russia, Lapland is closest to the country's central European areas. At the same time, it has common borders with Fennoscandia. With the latter, it shares its indigenous population, the Sámi. During different historical periods, the geographical proximity contributed to a relatively dense settlement by Russians (Pomors), Komi, Nenets, Norwegians and Finns in Russian Lapland, which has resulted in the region's long tradition of ethnic diversity even before the demographic policies of the Soviet era. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, various non-Russian ethnic groups inhabiting Russian Lapland, both indigenous people and settlers, were in constant contact with each other, trading and inter-marrying. They consistently contributed to the Kola Peninsula's population before the start of a large-scale Soviet influx of people into the Murmansk Region.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the Russian Empire encouraged settlers from neighbouring countries to move to the Russian shores of the Barents Sea so that this strategically important Northern edge of the Empire was more densely populated. Settlers were granted free land as well as exemption from military service and tax payment, under the condition that they should take the Russian citizenship. This policy attracted mainly Norwegians and Finns. However, Finns had been living in Russia long before on the long common border area, while for Norwegians the settlement Tsyp-Navolok on the Rybachii Peninsula became the first and main point of entrance to the Russian Empire.<sup>16</sup> In 1895, the Kola Peninsula had a population of 8,690 people, which included 220 Norwegians and 1,940 indigenous Sámi.<sup>17</sup> According to the first all-Soviet census of 1926, there were 168 Norwegians and 1,708 Sámi, while the region's entire population had increased to 23,006.<sup>18</sup> The

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comparison of census data reflects that the intense colonisation of the Kola-Peninsula by non-Northerners had begun, and that many Norwegians had returned to Norway. According to my interviewee, up to the beginning of the 1930s direct connections with Norway across the sea were still common, with people and goods moving across the state border, and some people leaving for good.

Currently, only a handful of people self-identify as Finns or Norwegians on the Kola Peninsula. The numbers of indigenous and quasi-indigenous<sup>19</sup> Sámi, Komi and Nenets remained stable in absolute numbers, but today, they amount to no more than 0.5 per cent of the Murmansk Region population.<sup>20</sup> During the twentieth century, all the locally born people living in this area from pre-Soviet and pre-urban times experienced considerable transformations in their lives. State policies during the decades between the 1930s and 1970s displaced, uprooted and killed people for reasons as diverse as collectivisation, sedentarisation, economic rationalisation, industrial and infrastructural development and the requirements of the military.<sup>21</sup> During Stalin's Great Terror, those groups who had ethnic kin abroad, no matter whether indigenous or settler, experienced a higher-than-average percentage of imprisonments or executions. In the Murmansk Region those affected were mainly the Sámi, Finns, Norwegians, and Swedes.<sup>22</sup> The rate of death sentences among people arrested in the Great Terror was 64.7 per cent among the Sámi people and 77 per cent among the Kola Norwegians (compared with a 73.8 per cent death rate among people arrested in all so-called 'national operations'<sup>23</sup>). Among those not sentenced to death, many died while serving their sentences. Altogether, on the Kola Peninsula 694 Finns, sixty-eight Sámi, twenty-three Norwegians and six Swedes were arrested in 1937 and 1938. Thus, while the rate of Great Terror victims among the whole



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Murmansk Region population was at 0.9 per cent, the percentage for these ethnic groups is much higher.<sup>24</sup> This allows us to speak of an ethnic component to Stalin's Great Terror in the Murmansk Region. Gidrun's life story illustrates how individuals tried, in different ways, to navigate those turbulent times.

## Introducing Gidrun' Aleksandrovna Mironova

The following biographical details are distilled from my meeting with Gidrun' Aleksandrovna Mironova (henceforth *Gidrun'*) at her home in Apatity (Russia) in 2014, where as part of the ORHELIA project, I interviewed her for approximately three and a half hours. The summary loses some of Gidrun' narration but the details help to contextualise the analysis that follows.

Gidrun' was born in 1934. She lived in Varzino, a Sámi settlement on the Barents Sea coast, until the age of ten. Her mother, Gidrun' Margaret Fredriksen (henceforth *Gidrun' Margaret*), was a Norwegian, whose parents had moved as settlers from Northern Norway to the Russian Empire in the end of the nineteenth century. Gidrun's father, Aleksandr Petrovich Zakharov (henceforth *Aleksandr*) was Sámi, and his ancestors were indigenous to the settlement of Varzino.

While most Norwegians stayed in Tsyp-Navolok, Gidrun's ancestors had established themselves more to the east in the village of Drozdovka. They had thirteen children and owned several fishing boats and a large two-storey house which were symbols of considerable wealth in that locality and period. In the wake of dekulakisation (the political campaign aiming at eliminating wealthy or supposedly wealthy peasants or *kulaks*),<sup>25</sup> the family was forced to leave their home that was then

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re-allocated to needy people. They were resettled to Khibinogorsk (Kirovsk), a new town for resettled former *kulaks*, euphemistically called 'special settlers', from all over the country.<sup>26</sup> When Gidrun' Margaret married Aleksandr she moved back to the Barents coast, to her husband's home village Varzino, where daughter Gidrun' and son Sasha were born. In 1937 Gidrun' Margaret and her father, Martin Fredriksen, were arrested on charges of espionage and executed in 1938. Gidrun' and her younger brother, who was still a baby, remained alone with their father Aleksandr and paternal grandmother. Aleksandr was the chairman of the village council (*sel'sovet*) in Varzino. He soon was arrested too. Remarkably, the villagers tried to prove his innocence, and unusually, the charges were dropped and he was released. Aleksandr resumed his former council role but he volunteered for the army, he was killed in action three years later. Thus in 1941, his children Gidrun' and Sasha became orphans. Gidrun' was entrusted to relatives' care in another village, Kanevka, on the Kola Peninsula, where attended school between the ages of twelve and sixteen. She then moved to Gremikha, a significant military base on the Barents Sea coast. There she worked as a nanny and as a cook. After a serious accident she was treated for two and a half years in Kirovsk. Once recovered, she remained there, found a job as a secretary and attended evening school. She completed her secondary school education at the age of twenty-six, which was not uncommon, due to the preceding war turmoil. Gidrun' married the ethnic Russian Aleksei Mironov in 1967. They had no children. Gidrun' became a nurse and worked in Apatity until her retirement. Only in the 1950s did she learn from trustworthy sources that her mother had been shot. Gidrun's mother and grandfather were both posthumously acquitted. Some of her relatives were offered Norwegian citizenship within a repatriation programme in the

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1990s and moved to Norway,<sup>27</sup> but Gidrun' preferred to stay in Russia where she had spent all her life.

## Humanising the oppressors

Although Gidrun' does not mention or not know the details of the espionage charges against her mother and grandfather, the accusations of espionage were probably linked to the so-called Blue Cross of the Order of Rosicrucians, a fictional espionage organisation invented by the Soviet authorities.<sup>28</sup> Kola Norwegians were accused of spying within this organisation for Germany, while Norway and Sweden were allegedly gateway countries for these espionage activities. These allegations were made public through the local state newspapers as part of widespread efforts to promote fear of external threats and thus foster Soviet-nationalist fervour. The alleged foreign agents' work in remote collective farms (kolkhozes) was emphasised in the media: to disorganise the build-up of collective economy from the inside and to destroy the Navy.<sup>29</sup> While Gidrun' did not know anything about charges brought against the other detainees of her village (all men), we may assume that a majority of them were Sámi because Varzino was a Sámi settlement. Most of the Sámi arrested in those years were accused of being part of another fictional conspiracy against the Soviet state.<sup>30</sup> Gidrun' recalled many details about her mother's arrest, and it is not surprising that this early turning point in her life formed the core of her biographical account as shown in her recollection of this event:

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Mum went to milk the cow, milked it, set down the pail and came back. Dear Sasha was sleeping on the bed. I had already awoken, and Dad was dressing me, and Mum was making the bed. [...] Mum made the bed and put Sasha there, fed him, and turning, said, 'Aleksandr, two policemen [*militsonery*] are coming to us'. But Dad just says, 'Well, so what? It may be anything'. Dad is dressing me, they are coming, they knock, come in, rifles, two rifles. 'Hello'. – 'Hello'. Well, they were in the living room, went in there, said greetings, were silent for a moment, then said, 'Does Fredriksen-Zakharova live here?' – She says, 'It's me'. – 'Get dressed'. Well Dad took me too, little Sasha in his arms, and led us to the village council [...]. They kept her there until evening, until the steamboat was scheduled to leave. [...] 'All right', they said, 'say your goodbyes'. And the people, the whole village was going, after all they took seventeen men, Mum was the only woman. Seventeen! [...] And they tried to tear me apart from Mum, I was screaming bloody murder and clung on to her. Dad barely unclenched my hands and took me into his arms. 'Let's go, my daughter, we have little Sasha there [...], let's go'. And Father carried me the whole way, and I cried the whole way, and we came to Grandmother. There of course everybody wailed, tears, everybody was filled with a sea of tears. My own Aunt Masha, Father's sister, they also took her husband, and she had six children. And all, all of our relatives also suffered. They took all of the men, after all nobody came back.

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Gidrun's memories about life under Stalinism reveal narrative spaces that do not always fit the stereotypical images of arrest and oppression during a totalitarian regime. More than once, amidst the emotional intensity surrounding Gidrun's recollection of the brutality of that era, she adds to her narration rather surprising instances of agency by the victims of oppression. Furthermore, she identifies traces of human kindness and empathy that were shown by the oppressors, as seen in how she talks about her mother's arrest:

And when Mum was arrested, still dear Sasha was only a few months old. She breast-fed him. [...] Grandmother lived next to the village council and she went and asked two policemen sitting there, and some other representatives of the state authorities were there. She says, 'Please let my daughter-in-law go so that she can breast-feed her son, he is still an infant'. – 'It's not allowed, not allowed'. But my grandmother was a brave woman you could say because she went and got the child, stood on the doorstep, and the child is crying. She says, 'All right, I will leave the child for you to feed and care for, what can I do, I cannot feed it, after all it is still a breast-fed infant. What am I going to do, give it sea *tura*?' Sea *tura* is this kind of seaweed.<sup>31</sup> That seaweed was collected and fed to the cows mixed with hay. [...] And then one police officer says, 'Well, let the woman go out on the porch'. – 'Well go to the ledge, she may feed him'. And then my grandmother says, 'my dear daughter-in-law, feed the child quickly, I will bring you something to eat'.

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Gidrun' humanises the guards as she implies a sense of empathy in their treatment of her mother. She highlights how they gave permission for her baby-brother to be breast-fed outside. Similarly, the previous quotation identifies the guards' uneasy silence when they had come to arrest her mother. Such details suggest that Gidrun' portrays the *militia* sent to arrest an 'ordinary' rural woman as humans with feelings and intuition, possibly even having difficulties in believing that the woman was a highly dangerous enemy of the people. We may see in this humanising narrative a coping strategy, lessening the horror of her mother's detention and removal from her childhood by shifting responsibility for her mother's death away from the guards to some faceless other or higher authority.

'Othering the evil' is not only performed by Gidrun' when looking back to the traumas she lived through. It was also a collective coping strategy in her village at the time when the events were happening: When Gidrun's father Aleksandr was arrested, the solidarity and self-empowerment evidenced by the people towards their village chairman Aleksandr seems striking. Despite the intimidation of previous arrests, the villagers were supportive in their efforts to gain Aleksandr's release. Their responses reflect an attitude seen elsewhere towards detention by the authorities: people were often convinced that it must be a mistake or an act of arbitrariness by the faceless bureaucracy, and they were confident that, if it were only possible to reach out and be heard at a level high enough, decisions taken by over-eager lower-ranking officials might be overruled. This faith in the ultimately 'good tsar', seen also in Eugenia Ginzburg's autobiography of her Gulag path,<sup>32</sup> is, again, a way of othering the horror. The faceless other is thus located between the omnipresent leader Stalin at the top

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and the concrete persons at the bottom entrusted with arresting the people and handing them over to the anonymous bureaucratic apparatus.

## **Ascribing agency to victims**

It is this faith in ultimate justice from above that triggered the villagers' remarkable agency. Gidrun' recalls the moment when her father was returned from imprisonment to the village and the circumstances that led to his release:

Dad says [...] to my grandmother, 'Mum, I was in prison for eight months because of my wife, eight months they beat me'. Dad came back, his head covered in bumps [...]. After Mum they arrested Dad. This means Dad was made out to be the accomplice of a spy, roughly speaking. And eight months he was locked up, [but] our kolkhoz – they got him out. [...] They took him away for embezzlement, but wrote him up for something else. [...] And they started to write, repeatedly, under pressure of the village, the whole village council, and everybody started to sign that he was the most decent person in the village, [...]. And Dad returned. Dad returned – it was a sea of happiness, an ocean of love. Then Grandmother says, 'Well, Aleksandr'. – 'Mum, they beat me. You walk and they hit you with the butt of the rifle either in the back or try to go more for the head'. What bruises! [...] 'And Mum', he says, 'don't tell anyone. They made me sign an agreement that I will not tell anyone about this'. I hear everything although I am a child, but I understood that Dad is important to me [...]. I will tell

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nothing to anyone, of course. And then I hear again, for how many times when I sleep there on the stove [...], Grandmother would come, collect the milk, all the time talking with her son nose to nose early in the morning. And always I would wake up and listen to what they were saying.

However, while Gidrun's father was lucky enough to be released and reinstated in his former position, the arrested chairmen of four other Sámi 'national' kolkhozes experienced the more common detainees' destiny of those days and were sentenced to death.<sup>33</sup> The story shows us that there were limited possibilities to influence the unpredictable entanglement of detention, release or execution on a grassroots level, but that the arbitrary nature of this entanglement could certainly not be disrupted systematically. Gidrun's account of her uncle's experiences also illustrate the mix of agency and chance:

Uncle Ludvig lived in Murmansk, he never married. They were pursuing him. Every three months he used to change his place of living, he travelled the whole coast [...]. One policeman told him: 'You know, you're a good guy. Every three months change the place of living. Before they find you, you're already in another place'.

This police officer (not from the secret police NKVD) had hinted to Ludvig that the slow state's bureaucracy could save his life. By regularly changing his place of residence, he could avoid the registration duty (*propiska*) and thus stay out of sight of the authorities. According to Gidrun, the police officer realised that Ludvig was an



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'ordinary' man and not a spy and used his insider knowledge in order to save him from prosecution. Another administrative loophole also saved the lives of three of Gidrun' Margaret's brothers and their families, thanks to a far-sighted suggestion by their father Martin:

Grandfather had been arrested in Tik-Guba, they took him away. Grandfather told his sons in Norwegian, 'get your mother and get the hell out' – I'm speaking now improperly – 'to Karelia. We'll then find each other there'. And when Grandfather and Mum were shot, they remembered their father's will: All three of them, three brothers, left to go there – to Karelia.

Karelia, located east of Finland between the Murmansk region and Leningrad area, was another administrative territory in Soviet Russia, and it had no history of settlement by Norwegian settlers. Moving there turned out to be a good strategy to escape Stalin's purges, because identifying and targeting victims was based on population statistics about class and ethnicity made for each region in the 1920s: detailed ethnographical knowledge generated in the early years of the Soviet Union was now used for mass arrest operations.<sup>34</sup> With no statistics about Norwegians in Karelia, no orders were issued there to take measures against them as potential traitors of the country. In Karelia, even before the war with Finland, the spy and traitor role was assigned to Karelians, the local transnational ethnic group with relations to nearby Finland.<sup>35</sup>

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Gidrun's recollections of family experiences reveal how individuals directed their own actions as they navigated through upheaval and atrocities. Survival depended both on personal agency and on chance: knowing and using the loopholes of the system, as well as simply arbitrariness and luck. As Chappell proposes: 'Everyone is acted on every day, no matter how independent they may be persuaded to be. Victims need not be passive, nor the passive weak, nor actors free agents'.<sup>36</sup> He discusses the idea of overcoming the active-agent-versus-passive-victim dichotomy in terms of decolonising the historiography of peoples who are usually considered colonised. More generally, this dichotomy is assumed to be often present, in research about states identified as being totalitarian, whether or not its population have been colonised.

In the case of the Soviet Union under Stalin, we do not usually encounter the small acts of agency in written historical sources. Conversely, open resistance and rebellion, often ending in disaster for the insurgents,<sup>37</sup> are more likely to find their way into written and archived documents. Small-scale agency can be anything from resistance over accommodation to collusion, with blurred boundaries between these categories. However, it is precisely the cautious and deliberate nature of minor forms of agency that could yield, as Gidrun's account shows us, some positive results and broaden our understanding of life under totalitarian systems.

## **Coping with the past**

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Revealing 'unknown aspects of known events'<sup>38</sup> is, as Portelli identifies, one of the advantages of oral history sources. However, we can gain more insights by questioning why Gidrun' gave them prominence in her life history account. Adult understanding and childhood perspectives are interwoven in Gidrun's account from the outset. Gidrun' mediates the terror partly through the lens of a child's perception. She listened to the secret conversations between her father and grandmother as a child and the details of the terror were disclosed to her unintentionally. While this is certainly part of Gidrun's childhood trauma, it was also part of growing up, understanding what was going on and thus coping with the trauma of enforced separation. From her adult perspective, Gidrun deliberately shows her grandmother as a courageous, enterprising woman who was able, through her own relatively small actions, to deploy agency and subtly state power. This is important for Gidrun' because her grandmother was a key person in her upbringing after she became an orphan. The grandmother's repeated irony over feeding her grandson *sea tura* challenged the guards as they carrying out orders. In Gidrun's account, the positive response of the guards to her grandmother's little act of defiance demonstrates her grandmother's strength of personality. Gidrun's sense of familial pride helps her to process and accommodate her recollection of childhood trauma.

Gidrun's account, whether unconsciously or consciously, suggests her response to past atrocities is to counterbalance trauma with pride, brutality with human kindness, and oppression with agency and chance. These are predominantly emotional responses that, on the one hand, challenge an implicit binary that narrowly sees subjects as either passive victims or active agents and, on the other hand, help Gidrun' to cope with the past. Gidrun's choice of what to prioritise in her account may

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be seen as part of her efforts to attach meaning to what she lived through, as positive meaning-making offers a way of coping.<sup>39</sup> How one makes sense of past experiences is, of course, not only linked to the past itself but to current discourses and to the specific conversational setting in which talking and listening occur.<sup>40</sup> Grief and vulnerability are, to a large extent, socially constructed: ‘Some lives are publicly acknowledged as more grievable than others and some as not grievable at all’.<sup>41</sup> It is possible that I, as a Western researcher, was implicitly perceived by Gidrun’ as somebody one-sidedly looking for downtrodden victims of an oppressive regime. I had discussed this earlier as a widespread pattern in Russian Lapland among members of transnational minorities used to the presence of well-meaning visitors from the neighbouring countries, be it reporters, NGO representatives or researchers.<sup>42</sup> This is also the case for Gidrun’, who enjoyed multiple attention, on the one hand from Norwegian writers and state officials, and on the other hand from Sámi ethnic activists. This specific context may have prompted wishes to counter-balance widespread accounts of victimisation by emphasising the strength and agency of Gidrun’s ancestors and acknowledging the decency of the people among whom she continued to live. Thus, Gidrun’s retelling may be understood in relation to her decision to stay in Russia despite the Norwegian repatriation programme. Her conscious choice over where to live and the balance between early pain and happier experiences in later life may have influenced how she narrates certain parts of her story, as ‘ageing is characterised by a search to find a personally meaningful way of life which connects the past with the present’.<sup>43</sup> Had she moved to Norway, perhaps other discourses and a different life trajectory might have framed her recall of oppression and agency differently.

## **Acknowledgements**

I thank Florian Stammler, Julia Obertreis, Hermann Beyer-Thoma, Heather Norris Nicholson, Cristina Allemann-Ghionda and both anonymous reviewers for giving valuable comments.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981, pp 26-27.

<sup>2</sup> Hiroaki Kuromiya, 'The Great Terror. New dimensions of research', in Andrej Kotljarchuk and Olle Sundström (eds), *Ethnic and Religious Minorities in Stalin's Soviet Union: New Dimensions of Research*, Huddinge: Södertörn University, 2017, p 43.

<sup>3</sup> To mention some: Roza Laptander, 'Collective and individual memories: Narrations about the transformations in the Nenets society', *Arctic Anthropology*, vol 54, no 1, 2017, pp 22-31; Florian Stammmler, Aytalina Ivanova, Lena Sidorova, 'The ethnography of memory in East Siberia: Do life histories from the Arctic coast matter?', *Arctic Anthropology*, vol 54, no 2, 2017, pp 1-23; Karina Lukin, 'Leaving Novaia Zemlia: Narrative strategies of the resettlement of the Nenets', *Arctic Anthropology*, vol 54, no 1, 2017, pp 32-45; Irēna Saleniece, 'Impact of the deportation of 25 March, 1949, on the population of eastern Latvia: Archival documents and oral history sources', in Olaf Mertelsmann (ed), *The Baltic States under Stalinist Rule*, Köln: Böhlau, 2016, pp 99-118; Baiba Bela, 'Everyday life, power and agency in turbulent Latvia: the story of Otto Irbe', in Aili Aarelaid-Tart (ed), *Baltic Biographies at Historical Crossroads*, London: Routledge, 2012, pp 37-52; Alexey Golubev, 'Remembering and re-evaluating "ashamed" experience: Interaction with the political police in 1945-1956 in the memory of the Soviet Karelian population', in *Remembering after the Fall of Communism: Oral History and (Post-)Socialist Societies*, Julia Obertreis and Anke Stephan (eds), Essen: Klartext, 2009, pp 263-274; Baiba Bela, 'Narrative and Reality', *Suomen Antropologi*, vol 32, no 4, 2007, pp 24-33; Rutt Hinrikus, 'Deportation, Siberia, suffering, love: the story of Heli', in Tiina Kirss, Ene Kõresaar and Marju Lauristin (eds), *She Who Remembers Survives: Interpreting Estonian Women's Post Soviet Life Stories*, Tartu: Tartu University Press, 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Andrej Kotljarchuk, 'Propaganda of hatred in the Great Terror. A Nordic approach', in Andrej Kotljarchuk and Olle Sundström (eds), *Ethnic and Religious Minorities in Stalin's Soviet Union: New Dimensions of Research*, Huddinge: Södertörn University, 2017, pp 89-121; Andrej Kotljarchuk, 'Norwegians in the Stalinist terror: New perspectives for research', *Fortid*, no 2, 2015, pp 18-22; Andrej Kotljarchuk, 'The Nordic threat: Soviet ethnic cleansing on the Kola Peninsula', in Norbert Götz (ed), *The Sea of Identities: A Century of Baltic and East European Experiences with Nationality*,

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*Class, and Gender*, Huddinge: Södertörn University, 2014, pp 53-83; Andrej Kotljarchuk, 'Kola Sami in the Stalinist terror: A quantitative analysis', *Journal of Northern Studies*, vol 6, no 2, 2012, pp 59-82.

<sup>5</sup> James C. Scott, *Seeing like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998.

<sup>6</sup> See Kotljarchuk, 2017, p 113. This claim refers to a Finnish community on the Kola Peninsula and a Swedish community in Ukraine (there were no Swedish communities in the Murmansk Region).

<sup>7</sup> Jon Alexander and Joachim Schmidt, 'Social engineering: Genealogy of a concept', in Adam Podgórecki, Jon Alexander, Rob Shields (eds), *Social Engineering*, Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1996, pp 1-19.

<sup>8</sup> Despite little mutual academic exchange, anthropologists and historians dealing with oral history come to similar conclusions about subjectivity and truth in oral testimonies, see for example: Kirsten Hastrup, 'Getting it right: knowledge and evidence in anthropology', *Anthropological Theory*, vol 4, no 4, 2004, pp 455-472; Alessandro Portelli, 'What makes oral history different', in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds), *The Oral History Reader*, London, New York: Routledge, 1998, pp 63-74.

<sup>9</sup> Joanna Bornat, 'Remembering and reworking emotions: The reanalysis of emotion in an interview', *Oral History*, vol 38, no 2, 2010, p 49.

<sup>10</sup> ORHELIA project ([www.arcticcentre.org/ORHELIA](http://www.arcticcentre.org/ORHELIA)), funded by the Academy of Finland (decision no. 251111).

<sup>11</sup> Russian Lapland as an ethno-culturally defined space roughly coincides with the Kola Peninsula in geographical terms and the Murmansk Region as an administrative-political designation.

<sup>12</sup> Presented in English in: 'The healing effects of storytelling: On the conditions of curative storytelling in the context of research and counselling', *Qualitative Inquiry*, vol 9, no 6, pp 915-933.

<sup>13</sup> For more details on the project's fieldwork and co-production oriented approach see Lukas Allemann, Stephan Dudeck, 'Sharing oral history with arctic indigenous communities: Ethical implications of bringing back research results', *Qualitative Inquiry*, 2017. Accessed online at <<http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1077800417738800>>, 18 October 2018; Stephan Dudeck, 'Oral history of empires by elders in the arctic (ORHELIA): A common history, a common economy, common language roots, and different practices among four arctic indigenous peoples', in Ieva Garda-Rozenberga (ed), *Oral History: Dialogue With Society*, Riga: Institute of Philosophy and

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<[http://issuu.com/lufsi/docs/oral\\_history/1](http://issuu.com/lufsi/docs/oral_history/1)>, 18 April 2018.

<sup>14</sup> Dudeck, 2013, p 64.

<sup>15</sup> Lutz Niethammer, 'Fragen – Antworten – Fragen. Methodische Erfahrungen und Erwägungen zur Oral History [1985]', in Julia Obertreis (ed), *Oral History: Basistexte*, Stuttgart: Steiner, 2012, pp 31-71.

<sup>16</sup> The history of settlers in Russian Lapland has been documented by GP Popov and RA Davydov, *Murman. Ocherki istorii kraia XIX-nachala XX v.*, Ekaterinburg: UrO RAN, 1999; Morten Jentoft, *De som dro østover: Kola-nordmennenes historie*, Oslo: Gyldendal, 2001; EA Orekhova, *Kolonizatsiia Murmanskogo berega Kol'skogo poluostrova vo vtoroi polovine XIX-pervoi treti XX vv.*, Doctoral thesis, St. Petersburg: St. Petersburg State University, 2009. Accessed online at <[http://kolanord.ru/html\\_public/col\\_avtory/OrehovaEA/OrehovaEA\\_Kolonizac-Murman-berega-Kol\\_poluost\\_dissertac\\_2009/index.html](http://kolanord.ru/html_public/col_avtory/OrehovaEA/OrehovaEA_Kolonizac-Murman-berega-Kol_poluost_dissertac_2009/index.html)>, 24 April 2018.

<sup>17</sup> NA Shavrov, *Kolonizatsiia, ee sovremennoe polozheniie i mery dlia russkogo zaseleniia Murmana*, vol 4, St. Petersburg: Tipografiia I. Gol'dberga, 1898, p 54.

<sup>18</sup> Vsesoiuznaia perepis' naseleniia 1926 goda. Natsional'nyi sostav naseleniia po regionam RSFSR. Murmanskaia guberniia' [web page]. Accessed online at <[www.demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/rus\\_nac\\_26.php?reg=79](http://www.demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/rus_nac_26.php?reg=79)>, 24 April 2018.

<sup>19</sup> While sharing similar livelihoods, only the Sámi have a legal indigenous status in the Murmansk Region. The Komi and Nenets may be aptly called para- or quasi-indigenous. See Yulian Konstantinov, *Conversations with Power: Soviet and post-Soviet developments in the Reindeer husbandry part of the Kola Peninsula*, Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 2015, pp 32, 238, 313. Accessed online at <<http://uu.diva-portal.org/smash/record.jsf?pid=diva2:865695>>, 12 April 2018.

<sup>20</sup> 'Itogi Vserossiiskoi perepisi naseleniia 2010 goda. 19. Razmeshchenie naseleniia korennykh malochislennykh narodov Rossiiskoi Federatsii', 2010. Accessed online at <[www.gks.ru/free\\_doc/new\\_site/perepis2010/croc/Documents/Vol4/pub-04-19.pdf](http://www.gks.ru/free_doc/new_site/perepis2010/croc/Documents/Vol4/pub-04-19.pdf)>, 18 September 2017.

<sup>21</sup> Konstantinov, 2015, pp 96-196; Anna Afanasyeva, *Forced Relocations of the Kola Sámi People: Background and Consequences*, MA Thesis, Tromsø: University of Tromsø, 2013. Accessed online at



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<sup>22</sup> Kotljarchuk, 2017; Kotljarchuk, 2015; Kotljarchuk, 2014; Kotljarchuk, 2012.

<sup>23</sup> Attention must be paid to the different use of the terms *nation/national/nationality* in the 'West' and 'East'. In the Soviet and post-Soviet terminology (and also today in most former socialist countries), 'nation'/'national'/'nationality' refer ethnic belonging as a category distinct from citizenship. Alongside with 'citizenship' (USSR), 'nationality' (e.g. Sámi, Norwegian, Polish, Uzbek, Korean etc.) was a mandatory field in passports and other official documents during Soviet times. See Rogers Brubaker, 'Ethnicity without groups', *European Journal of Sociology / Archives Européennes de Sociologie*, vol 43, no 2, 2002, p 178; Terry Martin, 'The origins of Soviet ethnic cleansing', *The Journal of Modern History*, vol 70, no 4, 1998, pp 813-861.

<sup>24</sup> Kotljarchuk, 2017, p 90; Kotljarchuk, 2012, pp 67-69, 74.

<sup>25</sup> see for example Robert Conquest, *The Harvest of Sorrow: Soviet Collectivization and the Terror-Famine*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1986.

<sup>26</sup> VYa Shashkov, *Spetspereselentsy v istorii Murmanskoi oblasti*, Murmansk: Maksimum, 2004.

<sup>27</sup> Jentoft, 2001.

<sup>28</sup> Kotljarchuk, 2015, p 21.

<sup>29</sup> Kotljarchuk, 2017, pp 101-106.

<sup>30</sup> AA Kiselev, 'Saamskii zagovor', *Zhivaia Arktika*, no 3-4, 1999, pp 58-60. Accessed online at <[www.arctic.org.ru/new/kisel.htm](http://www.arctic.org.ru/new/kisel.htm)>, 18 September 2017.

<sup>31</sup> The term is not in use anymore but can be found in historical documents, such as the travelogue by VI Nemirovich-Danchenko, *U Okeana: Zhizn' na krainem Severe*, St. Petersburg: Tipografiia i khronolitografiia A. Transhelia, 1878, p 305.

<sup>32</sup> Eugenia Ginzburg, *Journey into the Whirlwind*, New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1967.

<sup>33</sup> Kotljarchuk, 2012, p 72.

<sup>34</sup> Kotljarchuk, 2014; Martin, 1998.

<sup>35</sup> Irina Takala, 'Natsional'nye operatsii OGPU/NKVD v Karelii', in Timo Vihavainen and Irina Takala (eds), *V sem'e edinoi: natsional'naia politika partii bol'shevikov i ee osushchestvlenie na Severo-Zapade Rossii v 1920-1950-e gody*, Petrozavodsk: Iz-vo PetrGU. 1998, pp 161-206; Auvo Kostiainen, 'The Finns of Soviet Karelia as a target of Stalin's terror', in John Morison (ed), *Ethnic and National Issues in Russian and East European History*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000, pp 214-229.

<sup>36</sup> David A Chappell, 'Active agents versus passive victims: decolonized historiography or problematic paradigm?', *The Contemporary Pacific*, vol 7, no 2, 1995, p 315.

<sup>37</sup> James Scott, 'Everyday forms of resistance', in Forrest D. Colburn (ed), *Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, Armonk, N.Y: Sharpe, 1989, pp 1-34.

<sup>38</sup> Portelli, 1998, p 67.

<sup>39</sup> Crystal L. Park and Amy L. Al, 'Meaning making and growth: New directions for research on survivors of trauma', *Journal of Loss and Trauma*, vol 11 no 5, 2006, pp 389-407.

<sup>40</sup> A classic here is Erving Goffman, 'On face-work', *Psychiatry*, vol 18, no 3, 1955, pp 213-231; see also Heiko Haumann, 'Geschichte, Lebenswelt, Sinn: Über die Interpretation von Selbstzeugnissen', in Emil Angehrn *et al* (eds), *Anfang und Grenzen des Sinns*, Weilerswist: Velbrück Wissenschaft, 2006, pp 42-54.

<sup>41</sup> Jenny Harding, 'Talk about care: Emotions, culture and oral history', *Oral History*, vol 38, no 2, 2010, pp 35.

<sup>42</sup> Lukas Allemann, 'Yesterday's memories, today's discourses: The struggle of the Russian Sámi to construct a meaningful past', *Arctic Anthropology*, vol 54, no 1, 2017, pp 1-21.

<sup>43</sup> Peter Coleman, Christine Ivani-Chalian, Maureen Robinson, 'The story continues: persistence of life themes in old age', *Ageing and Society*, vol 18, no 4, 1998, p 415.